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Continent of curiosities: A journey through Australian Natural History

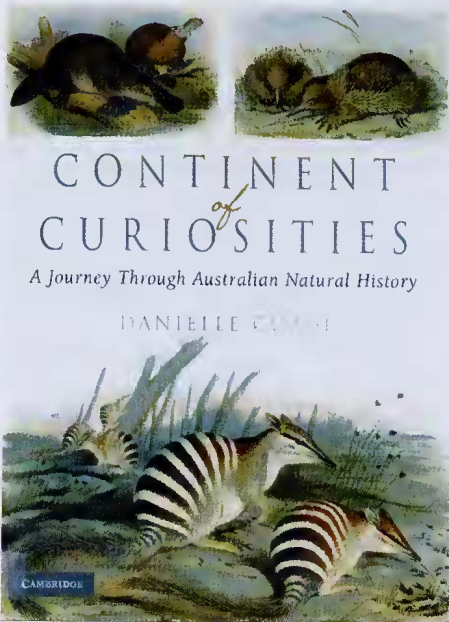
by Danielle Clode

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During her time as the Thomas Ramsay Science and Humanities Fellow, the author of this book chose a dozen specimens from the collection of Museum Victoria and used each of them as a peg on which to hang a discussion about modern biological concepts. As its title implies, the Fellowship, funded by bequest, fosters research and writing across both the sciences and humanities. The twelve chapters in this book are evenly clustered into four time slices: 500 years; 250 000 years, 250 million years and 4.5 billion years. A dia-

grammatic timeline prefaces each section, giving perspective to the chapters which follow.

To give some flavour, but nowhere near the scope: the skin of a Great Pampa Finch, collected by Charles Darwin in Uruguay, introduces a short history of Museum Victoria, its collections and research, and the principles of classification. A bark painting of a kangaroo and barramundi from Western Arnhemland is the key to European discovery and puzzlement over the marsupials of Australia, with



special reference to Dutch and Portuguese involvement. The Lesser Bilby heads up a discussion of early collectors in Australia and the use of indigenous knowledge to expand our understanding of former distributions. The chapter on Melbourne's protected water catchments and development of sewerage treatment in the early colony is headed by an aquatic beetle and leads into the 250 000 year section. Coventry's Skink seems a strange example to introduce Mountain Ash ecology, succession and fire adaptation, but different lizard species occupy individual niches within the forest ecosystem. A mounted skin of Leadbeater's Possum prefaces the chapter on the historical discovery and biology of Leadbeater's Possum and the Mountain Pygmy-possum.

The third section of the book is titled Fossils and Bones and starts with *Neotrigonia margaritacea*, from a family of shells known by European palaeontologists only as Miocene fossils until discovered by the French expedition on *l'Astrolabe* in 1802. The author takes this opportunity to weave in the debate about creation and evolution. A fossil imprint of the brain of a dinosaur from Dinosaur Cove on the Victorian coast was unusually large for the animal's size, with a clear

imprint of a pineal body and a large optic tectum. This raises the possibilities of thermoregulation, nocturnal activity, migration and prey preference. The famous Ape Case of mounted Gorillas, introduced into the Melbourne Museum by Frederick McCoy, gives an opportunity to describe Thomas Huxley's championship of Charles Darwin's later work *The Descent of Man*.

The final section in this eclectic collection has a picture of a Red Bird of Paradise, collected by Alfred Wallace, followed by his musings on biogeography with his famous 'line' and that of similar alternatives. *Spelaeogriphacea*, a crustacean from an ancient order with a Gondwanan distribution, is a fine example to introduce the geologist Lyell, Alfred Wegener's continental drift and the concept of vicariance. Finally, the Murchison meteorite leads on to the canals on Mars, possible traces of bacteria in meteorites, and extra-terrestrial life.

The theme of the book is the development of biological and geological thinking and its expression in the natural history art of collecting, using Australian examples from the Melbourne Museum. The discussion is broad, well referenced and illustrated with many historical plates and photographs. Within the text are boxed topics of ancillary explanation; my only criticism of these is that they interrupt the flow of the main text, a poor book design feature. Also I would warn that proof-reading of scientific names has missed a few errors. Nevertheless, it is a nice summary of natural history exploration and discovery in this enigmatic country.

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